

Washington comes to Gila Valley

By Greg Jones
Staff Writer

Congressman Rick Renzi (R-Ariz.) is bringing members of the House Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health to Eastern Arizona College for a congressional hearing on the Endangered Species Act (ESA) Monday morning.

Renzi, who sits on the House Resources Committee, said he wants the other members of the committee to see firsthand the effects of abuses of the ESA.

"I think Graham County has been one of the hardest hit by the over-reaching misuses of the ESA," Renzi said. "I want to bring Washington to the district to see firsthand the economic impact on human beings, and how animals and plant life -- by some people -- have been put above human life."

The hearing will focus on a bill (H.R. 2933) introduced by Bill Cardoza (D-Calif.) that would require economic impact considerations and the use of better scientific data when designating critical habitat. Renzi co-sponsored Cardoza's bill, also known as the Critical Habitat Reform Act of 2003. The bill cleared the resources committee in July.

Renzi said the problem with the act as it is written is, "It doesn't necessitate peer-science review as a counterbalance to any kind of claim by a plaintiff.

"You get this pseudoscience used to obstruct and to cease and desist any kind of construction project or development, but there is no requirement that peer review be included and that economic impact be included."

Committee chairman Richard Pombo (R-Calif.), Congressman Greg Walden (R-Ore.), Renzi and State Representative Jake Flake (R-Snowflake) are scheduled to appear. Congressman J.D. Hayworth (R-Ariz.) was scheduled to appear, but Renzi's congressional liaison Keith Alexander said he might not.

The hearing will start at 9 a.m. with EAC President Mark Bryce and Thatcher Mayor Bob Rivera giving opening remarks. A local Boy Scout troop will post the colors, and a local minister will give an invocation.

Witnesses will testify in two panels. The first panel will feature Harv Forsgren, regional forester with the U.S. Forest Service, and Dale Holl, regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The second panel will feature Flake, Graham County Supervisor Mark Herrington, Jan Holder, executive director of the Gila Watershed Partnership, Buddy Powell, director of the Mount Graham International Observatory, and Peter Warshall, the editor of Whole Earth magazine.

Witnesses were selected by Pombo, Alexander said, and are either local stake holders or senior government officials who deal with the ESA.

Witnesses will have approximately five minutes each to give remarks. They will then be questioned by members of the committee for an undetermined amount of time.

Todd Haynie, spokesperson for EAC, said the hearing is an exciting event for the college and the community.

"To be able to watch a congressional hearing live and not on CSPAN is going to be a unique opportunity for everybody here," he said. "It's important to the community, but we are just excited, thrilled and honored that they chose the college to be the venue.

"What better way to show ourselves off to the whole country?"

Delia Mattice, assistant in the Student Life office at the college, said several schools in the area and from as far away as Concho, are planning to attend. She said the schools have already requested about 300 tickets for their students.

EAC Police Chief Bill Mulleneaux is in charge of security on campus. In addition to EAC officers, deputies from Graham and Greenlee counties, and officers from Thatcher, Safford, San Carlos, the Department of Public Safety and K9 officers from the University of Arizona - Mount Graham International Observatory division will work together to provide security for the event.

Mulleneaux said the main task is securing doors to monitor the people coming in and to make sure they aren't bringing in prohibited items -- backpacks, cameras, handbags and ice chests.

Officers want to make sure protesters aren't intimidating the school-age children attending the event.

"We just want to make sure we have people there to handle the crowd," Mulleneaux said. "We're not anticipating violence or anything like that, but when you have dignitaries there, you have to be prepared to provide security for them."

The Safford Police Department will escort the politicians from the Safford Airport to the college.

Officers are expecting some protesters but don't know how many there might be.

Brian Nowicki with the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) said some people are planning to come from Tucson, Phoenix and Flagstaff to watch the proceedings. He said the CBD plans to hold a press conference at 8:30 a.m. to explain the organization's opposition to the proposed legislation being discussed at the hearing.

"Certainly no one is trying to stop this from happening," Nowicki said. "We're going to be there because we want to hear the rhetoric coming out of there."

Nowicki called other field hearings on the ESA held this summer a "political farce." He accused Pombo of using the hearings to advance an agenda aimed at eliminating the ESA.

Nowicki also accused Renzi of using the hearing as a campaign and said he "has previously shown complete disregard for wildlife conservation."

A press release from the organization called the hearing a "taxpayer-funded campaign stunt."

Sandy Bahr with the Grand Canyon chapter of the Sierra Club said the hearing is designed to serve Renzi's political career.

"It's a kangaroo court on the Endangered Species Act, and it's being held at taxpayer expense just 43 days before a highly contested congressional election for Representative Renzi," she said.

Craig Miller from the Defenders of Wildlife said the ESA has worked well for Arizona.

"Thanks to this law, we have wolves in the Blue Range of eastern Arizona, condors at the Grand Canyon, more bald eagles along the Salt and Verde rivers and the Apache trout well on its way to recovery," Miller said.

Renzi said he is not interested in "gut-

ting" the Endangered Species Act, but he wants to see a more balanced approach used when designating critical habitat that takes into consideration economic impact and also requires the use of sound scientific evidence.

"Right now, we've engaged in 30 years of pseudoscience," Renzi said. "The problem is pseudoscience is being used, and not enough action or corrective tools are being used to give the secretary the power to rebuke science that says the sucker fish is in the Gila when actually it is not."

The hearing starts at 9 a.m. and is expected to last from 2 - 2-1/2 hours. It is being held in the Fine Arts Auditorium on the South Campus of EAC.